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Art meets psychology at the Muscarelle's latest exhibition

By Amelia Heymann
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"My hope is that people become a little bit more aware of abstraction," Elizabeth Mead, professor of art. "One of the things about the collections of art institutions here in Williamsburg is there is a bigger emphasis on narrative than representational work and this was an opportunity to bring work from artists literally all around the world." (Amelia Heymann / Virginia Gazette)

Art is known for touching people's hearts, but what about their brains? This is the question posed in the College of William and Mary's Muscarelle Museum of Art's latest exhibition "The Adjacent Possible."

Elizabeth Mead, professor of art, said the exhibition is part of a course she and psychological sciences professor Jennifer Stevens are teaching: "Neuro-aesthetics: The artist and the mind."

"One of the things that Jennifer has found in her research is that if you have narrative work, in other words work which you can attach language to, you can tell a story about, it imprints on the brain more readily and for a longer duration," Mead said.

"I'm an abstract artist .... and I was interested in looking at how abstraction might imprint at a faster rate if students were in the presence of it and ... if they were not just physically in the presence of it but writing and talking about it, and most importantly making it."

To explore this idea, the museum will serve as a laboratory for the class. Each period, half of the students will run through psychological tests and look at the artwork, while the other half will make artwork.

"This (show) is a coming together of the academic enterprise of the university, with an exhibition being a laboratory and obviously it's had a lot of sort of academic expertise brought into it," said David Brashear, interim director. "I think Elizabeth and her partner have done an excellent job curating it and selecting the artists, and I think the works are going to deliver the content they want to deliver in the course." (Amelia Heymann / Virginia Gazette)

"So everyone will be doing the psychological studies, and everyone will be actually making objects and artwork," Mead said.

Mead said she and Stevens expect to write a couple of papers based off the research done in this course, as well as co-author an article for an academic journal.

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All of the artists in the exhibit work in different mediums and disciplines, according to Mead.

“We’ve got someone like Helen O’leary who when I look at pieces on the shelves back there you think ‘it looks kind of like sculpture,’ she’s actually a painter,” Mead said. “Or someone like Phil Chang. You look at that big beautiful monochrome magenta color, and you think of that as maybe a color fill painting, but then you learn that it’s actually photographic paper that has been exposed but never fixed.”

“I think because it’s an exhibition of abstract art. It’s a great window for the rest of the student body and community at large to kind of explore how different artists work with their own creative tools,” Brashear said.

Mead echoed this statement, saying the show is a great chance to expose the community to abstract art.

“My hope is that people become a little bit more aware of abstraction,” Mead said. “One of the things about the collections of art institutions here in Williamsburg is there is a bigger emphasis on narrative than representational work and this was an opportunity to bring work from artists literally all around the world.”

Elizabeth Mead, professor of art, said the exhibition is part of a course she and psychological sciences professor, Jennifer Stevens, are teaching -- “Neuro-aesthetics: The artist and the mind.” (Amelia Heymann / Virginia Gazette)

Want to go?

Runs through Sept. 27, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, Noon to 4 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, Muscarelle Museum of Art, 603 Jamestown Road. Admission $5.

Amelia Heymann, aheymann@vagazette.com, 571-289-5219.